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EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF
THE HIGH COMMISSIONER'S PROGRAMME

Forty-first session

UNHCR Policy on Refugee Women

(Submitted by the High Commissioner)

I. Introduction

The Executive Committee has adopted four general conclusions relating specifically to refugee women:-

- During its thirty-sixth session in 1985, the Executive Committee adopted conclusion No.39, entitled "Refugee Women and International Protection", in which it stressed the need for UNHCR and host governments to give particular attention to the international protection of refugee women.

- At its thirty-eighth session in 1987, the Executive Committee in its "General Conclusions on International Protection" noted that refugee women had protection and assistance needs which necessitated special attention in order to improve existing protection and assistance programmes, and called on all States and concerned agencies to support the efforts of the Office in this regard. It also recognized the need for reliable information and statistics about refugee women in order to increase awareness about their situation.

- In 1988, at its thirty-ninth session , the Executive Committee adopted a conclusion entitled 'Refugee Women' which elaborates further on the special vulnerability of refugee women and the particular problems that they face, notably in the area of physical security, and noted the need to promote the participation of refugee women as agents as well as beneficiaries of programmes on their behalf. The conclusion also stressed the need for 'an active

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senior-level steering committee' on refugee women to co-ordinate, integrate and oversee the assessment, reorientation and strengthening of existing policies and programmes in favour of refugee women, whilst ensuring that such efforts were culturally appropriate and resulted in the full integration of the women concerned. There was also emphasis on the necessity for public information on the issue of refugee women and the need for the development of training modules on the subject, in order to increase awareness of the specific needs of refugee women and the practical means of addressing these needs.

- At its fortieth session in 1989, the Executive Committee adopted a conclusion on refugee women reiterating concern about physical safety and sexual exploitation. It also called for a policy framework for the next stages in mainstreaming women's issues within the organization with particular attention to the need for female field workers to facilitate the participation of refugee women. It reaffirmed the conclusions of the thirty-ninth session regarding refugee women, called for expanded training and the development of a methodology to systematically address gender issues in refugee programmes.

- In addition to the Executive Committee conclusions, UNHCR, as a United Nations agency, is obliged to implement the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women. Both the above noted conclusions and the strategies reflect the international community's recognition that programmes which are planned or implemented without the consultation or participation of half the target population (the women) cannot be effective and could, inadvertently, have a negative impact on their socio-economic situation. This paper draws together the various Executive Committee conclusions and applicable United Nations resolutions into a policy framework for future action aimed at improving the situation of refugee women.

2 UNHCR's unique functions of providing protection to refugees and helping find durable solutions to their problems implies specific obligations with regard to programmes for refugee women who represent, with their dependents, over 80 per cent of the beneficiaries of UNHCR's assistance programmes. The present paper sets out the policy framework for the elaboration of an organizational work plan for the integration of refugee women into programming* and project activities. The Office's international protection activities on behalf of refugee women are considered in more detail in a separate paper, document EC/SCP/59, which also discusses in detail some of the considerations in the area of protection and assistance on which the formulations of the present paper are based. The Executive Committee's conclusions on this paper will be incorporated into the organizational work plan.

3 The present paper introduces, in Part III, the underlying principles of the policy. These are the integration of the resources and needs of refugee

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*"Programmes" refer to all aspects of UNHCR's activities including protection, assistance and durable solutions".

women into all aspects of programming, rather than creating special women's projects, and the need for each staff member to ensure that this takes place in his or her area of competence. In Part IV, the paper outlines the organizational goals for refugee women, that is, the activities which UNHCR is required to carry out in this connection under its mandate. In Part V are outlined the policy objectives, that is, the interpretation of the organizational goals at the policy level. Finally, Part VI sets out the operational objectives of the policy, that is, a series of activities at the project level to ensure the practical implementation of the policy. These objectives are based on the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women and the conclusions adopted by the Executive Committee since its thirty-ninth session.

II. General

4 The policy set out in this document is premised on the recognition that becoming a refugee affects men and women differently and that effective programming must recognize these differences. Furthermore, to understand fully the protection needs and assistance resources of the refugee population, and to encourage dignity and self-sufficiency, refugee women themselves must participate in planning and implementing projects. Socio-cultural and economic roles can, to a great extent, determine the pattern of such participation. Traditional roles are often disrupted and then either undermined, or reinforced by the refugee situation. It is, therefore, essential that organizations working with refugees recognize that special initiatives must often be taken to ensure that all refugees have the opportunity to contribute to activities planned for them.

III. The basic principle: Mainstreaming/integration

5 It is the intention of UNHCR to integrate the resources and needs of refugee women in all aspects of programme planning and implementation. This does not mean that separate "women's" projects are to be initiated or added on to existing general programme activities. Nor does it mean that responsibility for this process will rest with one work unit. It is the responsibility of each staff member to ensure that it takes place within his or her area of competence. The following terms and definitions are useful in understanding this concept.

What are programmes or projects which mainstream/integrate refugee women?

6 Any intervention, emergency, mid- or long-term, will have a different impact on men, women and children. Protection and assitance programmes or projects which mainstream/integrate refugee women are based on an explicit recognition of this fact. In activities which mainstream refugee women, action is taken to enable refugee women to participate and make a positive contribution.

7 Planning for such projects includes more than women's social role as daughter/wife/mother. It highlights a woman's economic role as income-earner for herself and her family, producer and/or manager of food, provider of fuel and water, and her religious, cultural and political activities. These roles, and, even more importantly, the change in these roles created by the refugee

situation are frequently overlooked by planners. Consequently, interventions which do not take these factors into consideration may be inappropriate to women, tend to isolate them from mainstream project activities, further reinforce their dependency, and force them into unaccustomed social or economic roles.

8 The concept of mainstreaming refugee women arose from a better understanding of the implications of the division of labor between women and men. A programme which integrates refugee women will have taken into consideration factors influenced by the male/female roles in a society and included these in the planned activity with a view to benefiting the whole target population, not marginalizing a portion of it. Refugee women are emphasized because, inadvertently, planners have often overlooked them. Until needs assessment and participation of all segments of a target group are integral to good planning, attention must be consistently drawn to refugee women. This will ensure that they are included in mainstream activities, not made peripheral to them or segregated into "women's projects".

Projects that focus on refugee women as a target group are not necessarily mainstreaming/integrating projects

9 The provision of goods to refugee women, that is, when women are passive recipients of shelter or food aid, is not in itself integrating refugee women. Neither is the provision of services to refugee women and their families necessarily an integrating activity. However, the provision of goods and services to refugee women may be part of a project or programme which mainstreams or integrates refugee women. For example, if women as well as men are consulted on the type of shelter required and the resources available to set up and maintain this shelter, then they have been integrated in the overall project. If women are asked about traditional diet, food preparation, and participate in the distribution and allocation of food, then they have been integrated into this activity.

10 By interpreting UNHCR's policy and operational objectives, the meaning of mainstreaming in a project becomes clearer. For example, projects may:

- identify constraints to women's participation related to project delivery procedures;

- respond to the initiatives of refugee women to improve their own situation;

- make available appropriate technologies that alleviate time and energy demands on refugee women;

- collect statistics indicating the male/female breakdown of the population and prepare baseline case studies in order to identify and to eliminate unintentional discrimination in delivering goods and services and thereby improve planning of future activities.

11 In its broadest sense, a UNHCR programme or project which mainstreams refugee women should attempt to:

- achieve greater involvement of refugee women both as participants and beneficiaries in the social and economic activities of the project;

- increase their status and participation in the community/society;

- provide a catalyst through which they can have access to better employment, education, services and opportunities in their society;

- take into account the particular social relationship between the refugee women and their families.

Underlying these broad definitions is the assumption that refugee women are participating or should participate at all levels of project and program development, from the initial identification of resources and needs to the evaluation stage.

IV. Organizational goals

12 The organizational goals of UNHCR regarding refugee women are:

a) to provide protection appropriate to their specific needs;

b) to identify an appropriate durable solution;

c) to provide assistance which will encourage the realization of their full potential and encourage their participation in preparing for the durable solution.

V. Policy objectives

13. The policy objectives which support the overall organizational goals are:

a) to recognize that refugee women represent, either as single women or with their dependents, approximately 80 per cent of UNHCR's target population and that programmes can be effective only if they are planned with an adequate understanding of, and consultation with, this group;

b) to ensure that the specific protection needs and the legal rights of refugee women are understood and that adequate measures are taken to respond;

c) to support the efforts of refugee women by recognizing their needs and resources and ensuring their participation in UNHCR's protection and assistance activities;

d) to ensure that the differing needs and resources of refugee women and refugee men are considered in programme activities and where necessary for cultural or social reasons, undertake special efforts to develop specific activities to ensure women benefit equally from programmes;

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e) to place particular emphasis on strategies to protect and assist refugee women, recognizing that becoming a refugee can result not only in an unaccustomed social role such as becoming a single head of household or being without extended family support but also in substantially increased physical workload in building and maintaining the future of the entire family;

f) to ensure that refugee women are equitably represented in resettlement programmes;

g) to encourage each staff member and staff of implementing partners to ensure that the integration of refugee women's resources/needs takes place in his/her area of competence.

VI. Operational objectives

14. Operational objectives provide the basis for the development of appropriate activities and work plans to support implementation of UNHCR's Policy on Refugee Women. These are:

a) to develop mechanisms to ensure that the resources and needs of refugee women are addressed in all stages of programme (protection and assistance) planning, management and evaluation systems;

b) to co-operate with implementing partners, other United Nations institutions, governments and development agencies with a view to benefiting from their experience in women in development activities and, where appropriate, adapting these to UNHCR's specific programming requirements, sharing with them the long-term development implications specific to the situation of refugee women and appropriate methods of incorporating their specific needs and resources into programming activities;

c) to develop communication strategies to call attention to the situation of refugee women of the public, NGOs, other United Nations agencies, donors, and host countries;

d) to develop specific plans for each organizational work unit within UNHCR which will encourage and facilitate consultation and participation of refugee women, and serve as a means of monitoring and maintaining this consultation and participation;

e) to develop training courses for staff of UNHCR and implementing partners to assist them in identifying opportunities for increased participation of refugee women in their areas of competence;

f) to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of protection and assistance programmes by ensuring that adequate attention is given to the needs and resources of all members of the target population;

g) to review and, where necessary, amend existing policies to ensure that they adequately take into consideration the situation and participation of all members of the target population;

h) to improve data collection and needs assessment in order to have a more accurate representation of the refugee population in order to target programmes more effectively to specific social groups;

i) to ensure that there are adequate female field staff to work with refugee women, and, accordingly, to review staffing and recruitment policies to ensure that there is an equitable representation of female staff and that this is adequately reflected in appointments, posting and promotion activities by UNHCR.

j) to review present operational activities and identify means of improving them in order to facilitate participation of refugee women, and achieve a greater understanding of their needs and resources.